IMAGINING BREATH, IMAGINING 9/11 IN INDRA SINHA'S *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE*

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In his influential response to Richard Gray, on the failure of the early 9/11 novel to imagine different forms for representing the event, Michael Rothberg criticized Gray's centripetal emphasis on "native ground," suggesting that, as critics, "we pivot away from the homeland and seek out a centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality" (158). Accepting Gray's central premise, that "the *form* of [these] works does not bear witness to fundamental change" and instead "assimilates the unfamiliar into familiar structures" (152), Rothberg nevertheless challenged Gray to address 9/11 as a transnational event, a challenge Gray absorbed almost without comment in his subsequent monograph, *After the Fall* (123). Even by 2008, Rothberg's moment of writing, this "centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality" had begun to emerge: he cites Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (2007) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). To this list, Margaret Scanlan would add Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2007), which, Scanlan argues, function as postcolonial critiques of the terrorist novel, and the atmosphere of the war on terror in particular. Subsequent work by Malreddy Pavan Kumar, on Orientalism(s) after 9/11, Ahmed Gamal, on post-migratory literature, Aroosa Kanwal, on contemporary Pakistani fiction, and Madeline Clements, on writing from a South Asian Muslim perspective, has certainly cemented the place of this centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality in the 9/11 canon, even if this expansion has tended to depend largely on establishment-approved, 'cosmopolitan' writers. For this essay, I want to consider how reading Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) against the backdrop of 9/11 can offer a further response to Gray and Rothberg's

concern with form, by addressing a physics of connection between the novel and 9/11 that are neither centripetal nor centrifugal but pneumatological.

On the night of the 2nd of December 1984, the Union Carbide India Ltd. plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, vented some 40 tons of methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas into the surrounding atmosphere. This aerosol attack, which caused coughing, stinging eyes, and the feeling of suffocation, killed some 3,787 people on the night itself, an estimated 8,000 within two weeks, and a further 8,000 since. In addition, it left over 500,000 injured in some way or another. *Animal's People*, Sinha's allegorical novel about the fallout of the 1984 Bhopal Gas Tragedy, presents itself as "recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy," "told entirely in the boy's words as recorded on the tapes," with "nothing changed" apart from its translation into English. (*Animal's People*, n.p.) This unpaginated, prefatory Editor's Note makes a formal gambit that is sustained through the novel: framed as a series of taped recordings narrated by Animal for a "jarnalis," *Animal's People* registers its implied readership, the journalist's audience, as a "single person," known only through its metonymic association "Eyes" (13). "Eyes," whose fascination is figured as both helpless witness and exploitive spectator, is therefore reminded, repeatedly, of the narrative frame, through Animal's direct invocations and through the chapter titles, headed as sequential numbers of "tapes." These "stupid eyes," who do not know "what the mist does to the people" (13), may hear the words of Animal's story, but, like the journalist who says "rights, law, justice," they are pre-emptively denied understanding: "Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don't mean the same…On that night it was poison, now it's words that are choking us" (3). Animal, in particular, presents a strikingly physical example of what the mist does, since, as a result of his exposure when he was born, he suffers from a curvature of the spine that forces him to walk on his hands. When set alongside devices like its associated webpage, or

facts about its author's Bhopal-based activism, or intertexts wherein characters from the novel are described as visiting Bhopal, the novel may be understood as self-consciously engaged with not just processes of toxic entanglement and exposure, but also of mediation and publicity. It is, as Jesse Oak Taylor has argued, "a participant in a public relations war ranging across multiple media" (180). As if to exaggerate its media estrangement, Sinha embeds this public relations war in allegory: he sets *Animal's People* in the fictional city of Khaufpur. Eschewing direct reportage, the novel links itself to Bhopal through a more nebulous process of textual and paratextual analogs. Like Bhopal, the legacy of "That Night" for the city of Khaufpur has been a succession of chronic conditions, associated with the acute exposure to poison gas, as well as evidence of active toxins in the local water and land. Like Union Carbide, the American "Kampani" that poisoned Khaufpur has ignored calls for justice by local and international activists. Close as it is, however, the novel refuses to witness the suffering of Bhopal directly, nor to turn it into a product for cultural consumption.

Animal's People has certainly not been overlooked as a postcolonial 9/11 novel, even if such discussions have largely taken place as asides within postcolonial readings that focus on the novel itself.[1] Predictably, these discussions turn on the moment when Animal describes watching "the big thing that happened in Amrika" on television with his associates at the beginning of Tape Five. Animal thinks of the televised images of the planes hitting the towers as "Bollywallah special-effects" and, despite repeated attempts to persuade him that it "isn't a movie," he insists "stuff like that doesn't happen in real life. Not in Amrika anyway. Here in Khaufpur we had that night. Nothing like that has ever happened anywhere else" (60; 61). These effects condense around the televised iterations of the moment the planes hit the Towers. CNN's repeated iterations of the footage lead Animal to mistake the event as multiple attacks on multiple Towers: "even after the

second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth planes hit and all those buildings fall" (61). For Animal, the very insistence of its mediated reproduction turns the event into a suspicious example of proto-fake news. By contrast, it develops a fully theological eschatology for Ma Franci, the French nun who raised Animal after the events of "that night" drove her mad. She identifies "the flames, the smoke, the falling towers" as signs of an "Apokalis" (Apocalypse) that "started on that night in Khaufpur" (61; 63). Since Animal will identify the people of Khaufpur as the "People of the Apokalis" (63; 366) as a refrain through the novel, they are figured as the harbingers for a sequence of events that include, but are not reducible to, the attack on the World Trade Center.

Both vignettes recall other 9/11 fictions by focusing on the event as a crisis of witness and spectacle because its media framing and theological implications make it seem incommensurable with the stuff of "real life." By either displacing it as a media event or sequencing it with a longer eschatology, begun by "that night," Sinha's framing of the event repeats the centripetal tendencies that Rothberg sought to argue against, by inverting them. Instead of Tape Five being an instance of the world turning towards America, as Gray might put it, the novel co-opts this signature event of American mourning, owns it, occupies it, and turns it into a metaphoric vehicle for the conditions facing the suffering people of Khaufpur. Sinha's work highlights the exceptionalism of its own event by co-opting 9/11 as a media event or a theological sign, as indeed Bhopal was co-opted, and by thereby highlighting how such moments of exception frequently become consumable news items, shorn of their catastrophic meaning.

The novel's concerns with witnessing, mediation and incommensurability explain why it might easily fit within a centrifugal tradition of 9/11 writing. Here, however, I would like to suggest an alternative trajectory, which does not seek to subordinate experimental formalism to the physics of centripetal or centrifugal influence. Instead, I would like to think about both Bhopal

and 9/11 as sharing a common trauma: they were both assaults on respiration. To make sense of this relation as a matter of breath, we should approach the attack on the Two Towers and the Bhopal tragedy as acts of "atmoterrorism," Peter Sloterdijk's term for assaults that inspire terror by replacing the body as their direct target with "the environmental conditions of the enemy's life" and, by extension, "the enemy's primary, ecologically-dependent vital functions: respiration, central nervous regulations and sustainable temperature and radiation conditions" (16). Originating, for Sloterdijk, in the gas attacks at Ypres in 1915, such attacks integrate "the most fundamental strata of the biological conditions for life into the attack: the breather, by continuing his elementary habitus, i.e. the necessity to breathe, becomes at once a victim and an unwilling accomplice in his own annihilation" (22-23). Read in this way, the terror attack on the World Trade Center incorporates, even prioritizes, the dust cloud that enveloped lower Manhattan when the Towers came down. Although for the people in the Towers the "terror from the air" arrived in the form of airplanes, the assault on their environment remained a matter of direct attack. For many people on the ground, out of the radius of falling debris, however, the "blizzard of white dust" would prove to be deadly, through what Paul Lioy, the exposure scientist responsible for sampling this dust, called "the WTC aerosol" (122). As physicians became more and more aware of the "World Trade Center cough," caused by dust inhalation, it became clear that the less spectacular, but no less significant, impact of the attack had been on the people breathing below. Since the aim of the 9/11 attacks, as acts of terror, are generally understood to be shock and awe assaults on US symbols, the slow violence caused by WTC aerosol seems less deliberate than accidental. This muddied intentionality, I believe, parallels the aftermath of the assault with the Bhopal tragedy, which, as an act of industrial negligence, might otherwise be sharply distinguished from 9/11. Initially regarded as an act of sabotage by Union Carbide, the overwhelming evidence suggests

that the tragedy might have been averted, or at least mitigated, but for poor maintenance of the facilities and their safety measures. Union Carbide's failure to safeguard against the leak up to and during the tragedy, and its subsequent failure to respond in a prompt and meaningful way to its aftermath, invites comparisons to an atmoterrorism that arises out of capitalism's basic indifference to any life not reducible to labor or commodity. As Pablo Mukherjee notes, investigations "demonstrated a systematic and structural assault on Bhopal's environment…in pursuit of short-term profits" (138). Attending to a common site of affliction for the victims, the breath, allows me to address connections between these disparate sites of trauma that do not prioritize one or the other as the dominant comparator, its origin or its source, and thus serve to short-circuit the physics of both centrifugalism and centripetalism that have tended to characterize debates over the Global 9/11 novel.

Certainly, breathing metaphors have emerged before in arguments for a centrifugal criticism. Scanlan, in her reading of Desai, Hamid, and Matar, claimed of these authors that, finding "themselves on the treacherous fault-line between the binaries of terrorist discourse, between, say, native and alien, or between Islam and the secular West," "they transform that fault-line into a living, breathing space in which the human consequences of rigid and lethal polarities become visible" (267). Eóin Flannery, writing of Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) and Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), similarly evoked the breathing space metaphor, arguing that these works "allow geographical and historical breathing space in which to reflect upon the motivations, personal tragedies, and the implications of the events" (297).

These metaphoric breathing spaces have their counterpart in the "sense of physical authenticity" carried by the breath. Daniel O'Gorman criticizes Judith Butler for using this "sense" in her reading of Marc Falkoff's *Poems from Guantánamo* (2007), quoting Butler's gloss on Ariel

Dorfman's epilogue to the collection: "the body breathes, breathes itself into words and finds some provisional survival there. But once the breath is made into words, the body is given over to another, in the form of an appeal" (61). O'Gorman acknowledges that Butler does not intend the "physical authenticity" of the breathing body "to be taken literally." But, he argues, its overtly figurative nature exposes problems in her broader project to deconstruct the "frame." For Butler, the imbalance in the compassion allotted to different sites of death is determined by their framing by media outlets. Neither outside nor inside the frame, it is the framing itself that constitutes the violent "derealization of loss" or "insensitivity to human suffering and death" upon which lives are determined to be "grievable" or not (23). O'Gorman's criticism is that Butler's deconstruction of the frame ends up "reinforcing precisely the kind of 'structuring effects' on reality that she ostensibly aims to critique" (25). The strength he finds in her reading of the poems is more in their ability to "blur" the frame than to "explode" it: "what takes place is a process of reshaping an already existing reality, not the replacement of a false reality with one that is somehow more true" (30). If we reread Butler's comment about breath, then, with some attention to O'Gorman's emphasis on reshaping rather than replacing, breathing becomes something more subtle than a metaphoric foil for vague notions of displacement or naïve embodied authenticity. It is an appeal, whose common features include what Dorfman, in his epilogue, calls "the attempt to make that breath permanent and secure, carve it into rock or mark it on paper." (71) Even if such attempts are, as Butler says, "provisional," and must, in the end, give way to an interpersonal appeal, this provisionality does not negate the traces their existence leaves behind. As the frame accommodates these traces—the marks of many more breaths—so its precise lines are blurred, and, effectively, reshaped.

To adopt an approach that addresses the marking of breath more directly, we might turn to the relation between breath and terror in the novel, and how this might shift our response to 9/11, from its prominence as political spectacle to its more muted residue, as an attack on the Commons, the air. The novel refers to breath, when it indexes residual or reenacted traumas from "that night." When the Nautapa, the nine days of extreme summer heat, begins, it is described as "like breathing inside a clay oven…The air is sucked from the sky and out of people's lungs" (278). This natural assault on both the air and the lungs, the lungs through the air, anticipates two subsequent moments. The first happens when a fire starts in the site of the former factory, seeming to repeat the awful trauma of "that night," when "the gas has come…That night has come again" (339), since the signs are "a tang in the air…I begin to cough, the chillies are catching in my eyes, my throat, each breath feels like fire" (339). The fire, which, it transpires, was started by Animal in a datura-influenced delirium, realizes Ma Franci's Apokalis (it kills her), therefore closing the eschatological narrative arc introduced by Ma Franci's response to the 9/11 footage. If the fire seems to reenact the trauma of "that night" to resolve its apocalyptic envisioning, it also introduces as tragedy what will be repeated as farce: an act of terror that turns out to be an advanced form of ridicule. The 9/11 footage introduced an apocalyptic narrative arc; it also introduced a narrative arc concerned with hyper-mediation, where narrative events are deemed real or false for reasons that exceed their actual facticity and which culminates in the following scene:

> What all happened next, the world learned from these folk themselves. The shameful meeting began in a room with a big table, the four Amrikans were on one side, the politicians on the other. They had begun their arguing and haggling when without warning their eyes began to sting. An evil burning sensation began in their noses and throats, a little like the smoke of burning chillies, it caught nastily in the

> throat, it seared the lungs, they were coughing, but coughing made it ten times worse. Something was in the room, something uninvited, an invisible fire, by the time they had realised this it was already too late. These big shot politicians and lawyers, they got up in a panic, they reeled around, retching, everything they did just made the pain and burning worse. Tears streamed from their eyes, hardly could they see. One of the lawyers was trying to vomit, the rest of them ran in panic. They rushed from the room, jostling in the doorway each man for himself…These Kampani heroes, these politicians, they were shitting themselves, they thought they were dying, they thought they'd been attacked with the same gas that leaked on that night, and every man there knew exactly how horrible were the deaths of those who breathed the Kampani's poisons. (360)

The passage describes a meeting between the officials of the "Kampani" responsible for the disaster and local politicians seeking to profiteer from these officials at their constituents' expense. The meeting is disrupted by what, on first reading, seems to be an attack that reproduces the effects of the exposure. We find a similarly incremental approach in Pablo Mukherjee's study of the novel. Mukherjee begins by imagining the effects of MIC on a "you" that might equally be the reader as the impersonal subject: "the air smells of burnt chillies. If you do not take the hint and get away as fast as possible, soon you find yourself in a thick white mist. Your eyes, throat and lungs begin to burn and fill up with oozing fluid and melting tissues. Blinded you gasp for breath as fluid begins filling up your lungs" (135). If both Sinha and Mukherjee mark the smell of burnt chillis, Mukherjee develops a far more viscerally detailed description of the impact on the body, whereas Sinha sidesteps from the immediate, felt experience of breathers to the atmosphere of the room, the "something uninvited." Comparing Mukherjee's and Sinha's respective responses raises an

important question about the ethics of representation, since Mukherjee's account is more detailed than even this, Sinha's longest description of the immediate physical effects faced by people on "that night" in the novel. Moreover, this, Sinha's "poetic justice of fully rhyming kind," is "not the same as real justice": the attack on the meeting is caused by someone emptying "a bottle of stink bomb juice into the air conditioner" (361). Not only does it avoid Mukherjee's viscerality, then, but this, the most substantive passage apparently about the effects of MIC in a novel about Bhopal, is actually about a stink bomb.

If I read Sinha correctly, the bathetic reproduction of the attack by stink bomb serves a pragmatic purpose. Retributive violence, while satisfying, cannot kill the Kampani, since a "real attack" would harm only its human entities. By comparison, the stink bomb highlights the symbolic weakness of the Kampani, while demonstrating that its claims to ignorance are in fact obfuscations. By trapping the officials in a moment that mimics the circumstances of "that night," without its harmful load, the stink bomb scene separates out the material signifiers of toxic entanglement, the smell, the coughing, from their terrifying signification, death and disfigurement. Their terrified responses depend on their knowledge of this signifying chain, a knowledge, moreover, that the Kampani has sought to obfuscate as ignorance. This exposure serves as the pragmatic means for harming the Kampani as a symbolic entity: "What made the whole thing fully grand was that someone tipped off the press…Once the secret was out, the deal was dead" (361). Critical to the efficacy of the event is, as in 9/11 narratives, the role of its mediatization. Here, however, the frame is forced to adjust to two forms of terror: the terror of the functionaries "compared to the terror the Kampani brought on the people of Khaufpur" (361).

Now, it is telling that this "act of terrorism" (361) is committed by "a poor woman," "clad from head to toe in a black burqa" (360). The point, then, seems to repeat as farce the tragedy of

9/11, by associating the attack with a garment strongly associated with Islam, while also subverting any assumption that this creation of terror was, or needed to be, in any way associated with a loss of life. The strong suggestion is that the woman is Elli, an American doctor who runs a clinic for the people of Khaufpur. So, if the terror attack evokes the Islamophobic iconography of 9/11, wherein Muslim dress is turned into a cypher for terrorist behaviors, it also seems to subvert the hegemony of this imaginary in ways that might, at first brush, appear to be postcolonial. However, there is little exploration of the complexities of this dress. Not only does it serve as mere disguise, yielding little in its description to obscure the problematic assumption that it signals terrorism, but its use reinforces, rather than dissembles, this association. It would be more accurate to find, in the appearance of the burqa, an impious reaction to the hegemony of 9/11 discourse. This impiety is already evident in Animal's refusal to believe the news footage.

The novel, this impiety suggests, operates well within the physics of centripetalism: it reconfigures its own disaster site as center, and draws the internationally recognizable icons of 9/11 into its frame. Rather than "responding to 9/11," though, it uses that event's popularization to reframe it as an easily consumable image, useful for its own purposes. First, in reproducing 9/11 itself, as a moment when his characters reflect on mediation, Sinha does not challenge the semiotic valence of 9/11 iconography; he uses this valence to satirize their hegemony, and to invert it. As when O'Gorman criticizes Butler for failing to "explode the frame," this inversion actually reinforces the cultural dominance of 9/11 iconography, since it remains the source domain of Sinha's metaphor, reproducing in its attempted centripetalism a disavowed centrifugalism.

Against the novel's own push towards centripetalism, whether or not we read it as disguised centrifugalism, we can set the workings of the breath. For, when the comic associations of the event are stripped away, there is a compelling contiguity between the terror of the people on "that

night" and the businessmen in their meeting room. This terror, argues Sloterdijk, is the terror caused by turning the breather into the "unwilling accomplice of his own annihilation," a terror whose moral differences are not to be found in the affected victims, but their readers. This shift from the writing to the reader consolidates a counternarrative to the novel's own tendency to reproduce a physics of centripetalism. Depending as it does on the reader's ability to interrogate his or her own gaze, the novel invites such counternarratives. As I have already indicated, the spectacle of 9/11, as framed in Tape Five, lays an implicit critique of 9/11's primacy in the global politics of the early twenty-first century. Indeed, by staging it as a media event within Khaufpur, for consumption by its residents, it highlights Khaufpur's own rival exceptionalism, as "world capital of fucked lungs" (230). Given the imbalance in treatment between the two sites it is difficult not to be sympathetic to this act of appropriation. After all, "the difference between Khaufpur and Amrika" is not simply, as Animal's friend Farouk puts it, "a time difference." When Animal disputes the veracity of the footage, saying, "Look outside, it's dark, it's raining, but those buildings are in sunshine," Farouk calls him an idiot, noting the time difference, and concluding "when it's night here, it's day there" (61). Night and day might well describe the difference in response to the two events: whereas advocates for Justice for Bhopal continue to battle for compensation thirty-five years after, within hours of 9/11 there were local, national, and international upswellings of solidarity, as Hendrik Hertzberg would write in the *New Yorker* in 2006. Indeed, without reducing this matter to a "zero-sum game," Rothberg's favored defense against comparative trauma, the compensation figures between the two sites are startling. The 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund paid out over $7 billion to the families of 2,880 people who died and to 2,680 people who were injured between 2001 and 2004, when the scheme went into hiatus. Since its reopening, in 2011, it has paid a further $5 billion to 22,500 victims. In 2007, twenty-

three years after the tragedy at Bhopal, its State Government in Madhya Pradesh reported total compensation of $220 million had been paid on 574,304 cases.

So, while the novel's ostensible treatment of 9/11 parallels these material differences in economic circumstance, its aesthetics of breath opens up the possibility of an alternative reading of the postcolonial 9/11 novel. This alternative reading is informed by another 9/11 text that develops a similar aesthetics of breathing, albeit in poetic form: Juliana Spahr's "poem written after september 11/2001" from the collection *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005). While I don't mean to suggest any direct relation between Spahr's work and *Animal's People*, reading one alongside the other opens up aspects of the novel's prosody that correspond to, and develop, Spahr's poetics of breath. Spahr's poem attempts to escape the centripetal pull of 9/11 nationalism through a poetics that understands the air as commons, "this connection of everyone with lungs." But insofar as her project retains traces of centripetalism, it realizes this poetics imperfectly, problems which find possible solutions in the narrative and the form of *Animal's People*. Here we might think of the novel as cleaving together both the prosaic and poetic traditions of the 9/11 canon, traditions that, as Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn suggest, tend to be read divergently on the matter of form:

> The transition from 2004's *Windows on the World* to 2007's *Falling Man* demonstrates another feature of 9/11 narratives that distinguish them from the poetry written about and after 9/11. Whereas the initial poems tended to be formally conventional, the first novels about 9/11 featured formal innovations—self-reflexive meta-narratives, disrupted temporality, multiple viewpoints. (4)

Largely adhering to formal conventions, Juliana Spahr's poem nevertheless provides a clear demonstration that breath poetics can detach from actual poetry, suggesting its amenability

to translation into prosody. After all, it is far more concerned with the thematics of breath as a theoretical, or philosophical, point of connection than the formal innovations of, say, Olson's Projective Verse. Spahr lists the connections between lungs enabled by the breath. First, the poem introduces "the things" (parts of the body), "the shape" (the unifying impression of these parts), and "the space" outside this shape (9). It then reflects on how the breath brings into relation the things, the shape, and, most importantly, the space, through a cumulative or chain poem. Each iteration of the chain begins "as everyone with lungs breathes the space…" Successive iterations expand from the hands to the room, to the building surrounding the room, until it expands to the level of the mesosphere. Spahr's achievement is to entangle these scalar increments of space through a simple process of enumeration. This permits her to introduce the subject of her poem, the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, gradually and without spectacle. Instead of delivering the event, encapsulated and imaged, she concludes the poem by enumerating the make-up of WTC Dust, those particles absorbed by the lungs of the people engulfed by the dust cloud.

Spahr is responding to one of the definitive moments for an imperial power. As such, she can explain the context of her relational poetics by merely referring to a date. Her poem accumulates increments of scales sequentially, in a linear pattern, without disruptions of scale variance, because it is credible that the effects of 9/11 will, as they have, radiate out, from the local to the national to the global, or centrifugally, as Rothberg might say. In the early twenty-first century, the USA could imagine that its local tragedies disproportionately affect the larger world stage, because they did. Sinha, however, is dealing with an event actively being forgotten. His reflections on lung aesthetics demand an explanation of context, the domain of the novel. In doing so, however, they implicitly challenge the universality of Spahr's scalar increments. Spahr's poem describes a sequential process, in which increments of scale can function uniformly as successive

enumerated qualities. But, when similar increments are given context, in Sinha, each challenges the operations of things universally at scale. Things do not obtain at scale, or, at least, they do not obtain in the same way. In *Animal's People*, one person's positive interpretation of breath's relations often provokes its negation: "[Zafar] speaks of how people whose lungs were ruined by the Kampani's poisons, who have difficulty still breathing, still manage to laugh. But when Zafar talks like this it's not the laughter of the poor I hear, it's the laughter of the Kampani that slaughtered them" (114). Despite their breathing difficulties, the poor are able to laugh; however hopeful this proves for Zafar, Animal suggests this same laughter may be recognized as the more sustained laughter of the Kampani. Where this might appear at first to be a simple comparison, between the poor and the Kampani, Zafar's response, as a grassroots activist working for social justice, is markedly different from Animal's, as a matter of scale, since it attends to the laughter of the poor, as an immediate, physical reaction, rather than to the more structural significance of laughter, as a metaphor for ongoing relations of humiliation and power.

In his response to the novel's engagement with questions of scale, Jesse Oak Taylor has lauded *Animal's People* for reconciling the "ostensible focus on the individual subject" in the novel as genre with the need to constitute "broader collectives" (186). Acknowledging Rob Nixon's important work on the novel as "environmental picaresque," where "the symbolic economy of Animal's body affords Sinha an implicit yet unforgettable image of a body politic literally bent double beneath the weight of the poisoned city's foreign load" (52), Taylor insists that this body politic not be seen as "only metaphorical," since Animal bears the physical markers of a toxic body "reimagined…as a locus of accretion, a site where chemicals interact and build up over time, producing new forms and unknown reactions" (187). This site of "trans-corporeality," after Stacy Alaimo, troubles divides between bodies and environment, which, for Taylor, scales up to "a body

politic at once literal and metaphorical, individual and collective[;] Animal in a sense embraces the plight of all organisms on a toxified planet" (194). Although Taylor's analysis extends Nixon's interest in metaphor to more literal concerns with toxicity, it is perhaps too determined to reconcile the scale differences that emerge in the novel, in a manner similar to Spahr. Attentive to the differences of scale, both approaches nevertheless risk overriding incommensurable differences in their efforts to deliver readings that reconcile connections between everyone with lungs. I can't help but feel, however, that such difference-eliding connections are precisely what a novel like *Animal's People* writes against, not least by refusing to be a novel "about" Bhopal; as Sinha insists, "Khaufpur shares things with, but is not, Bhopal" (2007).

This pattern of comparison—whether centrifugal or centripetal, starting from Ground Zero or Khaufpur's "power of zero"—signals a problem for the framing of the postcolonial 9/11 novel that neatly parallels what Molly Wallace calls "the Bhopal gesture" in criticism of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). *White Noise* was released only a month after the Bhopal tragedy. "The Bhopal gesture" in DeLillo criticism is the scholarly "tendency to reference the accident as evidence of DeLillo's prescience in writing of an 'airborne toxic event'" (24). Wallace links this tendency to an activist article in 1985, titled "We all live in Bhopal," in which sympathetic activists extended the situation in Bhopal to all forms of toxic exposure (there is no escape from toxic environments; we all live with global risk) in order to develop new forms of solidarity. The cost, Wallace observes, of the "Bhopal gesture" is to "empty the event of its specific historical, geopolitical, and toxicological content" (65). The consequence is not simply to elevate a chance event to the level of global necessity, Wallace demonstrates; it also conflates the risk of catastrophe with actually occurring catastrophes. This conflation means that the necessary factors that made the event

practically inevitable are often overlooked. If we are all victims, then, paradoxically, our victimhood no longer accords us preferential regard. Still, the Bhopal gesture

> offers something useful to thinking global risk, as affixing the referents implied in the comparison—not only those in Bhopal, whose experience is decidedly unlike that in Blacksmith, but Union Carbide, MIC, Institute, Middleport, and those farmworkers in the United States who, as the authors of *No Place to Run* remind us, "are among the lowest paid and least protected of workers in [developed] nations"—might render the novel's "symbols" legible in a way that "disclose[s] the structural character of the problems while at the same time fostering the ability to act." (82)

By reframing the Bhopal gesture as a vehicle by which *White Noise* can reflect, paradoxically, the realities of US chemical exposure, Wallace generates a mode of reading global risk that allows for the metaphor to travel, without obscuring the material differences between Bhopal and DeLillo's Blacksmith. She turns *Animal's People* to highlight these differences: "Juxtaposed to DeLillo's placid Blacksmith, Khaufpur could not be more different, from the poverty and garbage to the overt political activism" (84). The consequence of her reading is to embrace the analogical possibilities of reading the two works in relation to the risk discourse of global activism, while inverting the analogical process to focus on the material differences that such discourses risk occluding. In other words, rather than reading one event through the other, as implied by centrifugal and centripetal criticism, the basis for comparison becomes a common discourse of risk, which itself might be said to rest upon a sense of the Commons, those resources held in common for the use of all, like the air we breathe.

Common to readings of the novel by Nixon, Mukherjee, Taylor, and Wallace is an insistence on Bhopal's bodily impact. However, only Mukherjee attends in any detail to the meaning of the breath, and then only as it relates to Somraj, the singer once dubbed the Voice of Khaufpur, and the impact of "that night" on his singing voice: the fire "that Somraj had breathed, which had scoured his lungs and taken away his singer's breath" (219). When Ellie declares to Somraj that she will find a way for him to sing again, he "thinks not": "The breath of a singer is not ordinary breath. My father could take a breath and hold it for two minutes and then exhale it smoothly for one minute more. At first I could not do that, I learned slowly" (*Animal's People* 226). At the same time, he acknowledges, "Breath is everything…*Sa* can be sung in as many ways as there are ways of breathing. For a singer, breath is not just the life of the body but of the soul" (226). This evocation of soul, or *prana*, may be learnt. In this developed, skilful technicity, it is not "ordinary." But it is also something that "everything" has. The singer's breath is dialectical: it requires technique but it is also always already everything.

The contradiction dissolves if one takes Somraj's description as describing two discrete forms of breath. First, breath may be a biophysical commodity, to be exchanged, in song, work, accidental exposure. Second, it is a metaphysical descriptor, whose significances are non-fungible because they are, in Spahr's words, "this connection of everyone with lungs." For these relations to work, however, they cannot operate in the same way at all scales: metaphysical breath may be embodied, but it implicates the biophysical breath in a different way to the protocols imposed by a singer's judgments. That Somraj can understand the music in the world does not mean that he understands all this music to be equally pleasing according to the same standards. Embodying the breath requires a more nuanced account of aesthetics than mere levelling.

Somraj adheres to a Platonic aesthetics of song that derives its significance from its relation to *sa*, "the boss note" (249). The singer's "job is to sing *sa*, nothing else only *sa*, but *sa* is bent and twisted by this world and what's in it…and the result is what we call music" (249). So, while Somraj's discussion of technique relies on the purity of the *sa*, facilitated by a clear, ungranulated transmission of the breath from the lung via the voice, such breath-based aesthetics are not always libidinally fulfilling. The lung, as Roland Barthes complains in "The Grain of the Voice," is "a stupid organ, [it] swells but gets no erection" (183). Barthes is writing a broadside against the dominance of breath-based aesthetics in classical song: he wishes for a vocal aesthetic based in the throat, on the "grain" expressed by articulation. For all that Somraj does not consider his ruined voice to be fit for song, its bending and twisting by the world, by "that night," gives it a greater "grain" or libidinal content, or at least so Barthes might argue. This reading is perhaps not so far-fetched as it might seem. After all, Somraj begins a relationship with Ellie, the American doctor, on the basis of their shared love of music. Ellie is also the object of Animal's lusty fantasies. Animal, the being most obviously affected by "that night," is characterized by a large, and often erect, penis. There is, in other words, a constellation of highly sexualized correspondences to Somraj's position as (former) singer that depend upon the deformation of a purely aerated *sa*. Music may then, as Mukherjee argues, provide "a model of the cultural expression of…love…understood as the realization of the simultaneous singularity, plurality and unity of beings" (162), but this is perhaps less because of the musical expression itself, and more because of the breath that sustains it.

The novel concludes with Animal's resolution not to accept an offer, sourced by Ellie, to fly him to the US for reconstructive surgery. While this surgery would make him "an upright human," he would be "one of millions, not even a healthy one at that" (366). Instead, he chooses

to use the money he has so carefully saved through his picaresque thefts and solicitations to buy Anjali, a child prostitute, out of slavery. This resolution, to maintain his posthumanity, is generally understood to be a refusal to accept conventional narrative solutions, such as curing or fixing problems that affect bodies physical and political. For instance, Justin Omar Johnston argues that the "People of the Apokalis" referred to in the final line, Animal's people, "do not accept the narratives of development common to colonialism…Rather they inhabit and are inhabited by the expanding zones of apocalyptic capitalism" (142). Such readings are, I agree, congruent with the dominant narrative of the novel, wherein the exceptionalism of Khaufpur/Bhopal is prioritized. This priority is not at the expense of solidarity with other sites of toxic exposure; rather, the "People of the Apokalis" must see their origins in Bhopal, in which the eschatology of toxic entanglement begins. 9/11, in this dominant narrative, becomes nothing more than a further iteration of the ongoing apocalypse, understood as both a theological circumstance and a media event. In other words, the dominant narrative of the novel is characterized by an internal, centripetal resistance to the hegemony of 9/11. At the same time, such centripetal resistances, when they are stitched together across multiple postcolonial novels, demonstrate exactly the larger centrifugal tendency in cultural production raised by Rothberg, whereby 9/11 becomes the vehicle for globalizing works otherwise all too confined to their own specific circumstances.

This essay has sought to resist both the internal narrative that dominates the novel and its reproduction of motifs that serve to place it uncritically within a canon of postcolonial 9/11 fiction, by refocusing attention on the breath. Breath becomes the means of accessing the Commons, a common right of access to resources, whether through acting as a common mnemonic for shared sites of trauma or for imagining forms of cultural production like song. Here, breath's access to the air provides a basis for sharing images across the cultural spectrum, from Bhopal to 9/11 and

back, without asserting one or other as culturally primary. The problem with this recourse to the sharing of breath is, as discussed in relation to Spahr's *connection*, its tendency to obfuscate or elide real, material inequalities across a World System. Nevertheless, it opens up the possibility of a dialogue between sites of historical trauma that do not rest solely on their dominance of a mediascape or other zones of "apocalyptic capitalism."

Postscript, Written July 2020

As this article traversed the publication process, a global respiratory event tested the foundations of its argument, while reinforcing, all the more, my sense that breath offered an alternative to the physics of centrifugalism and centripetalism that have categorized aspects of the 9/11 literature debate. Instead of revise an argument rendered obvious by circumstance, I thought it better to separate the main body of the article, submitted before circumstances about Covid-19 were well known, from this reflection, shaped as it is by what I know in July 2020. If the visual narrative of Covid-19 represented its spread as a slow diffusion across national and international maps with a recognizable point of origin or "perpetration" in Wuhan, China, our intimate experience of it was as an attack from within (for those who got it) or as a risk of attack by those physically close to us (for those lucky not to). Far from being a shared event, it appeared to reinforce what Sloterdijk has elsewhere diagnosed as the "connected isolations" of foam, which he understands to be "an aggregate of micro-spheres (couples, households, companies, associations) of different formats that are adjacent to one another like individual bubbles in a mound of foam and are structured one layer over/under the other, without really being accessible to or separable from one another" (trans. in Borsch 553). After all, the claim that anyone could get the virus was swiftly qualified as it became clear that the disease it caused landed differently.

Although it was predictably linked to age as a matter of physical risk, its social determinants were clearest in the overwhelming vulnerability of persons who were more likely to be affected because of their proximity to concentrations of air pollution, or more likely to be exposed because of their dependency on the gig economy. Since these socially determined conditions often correlated to poverty and to "race," the awareness brought a welcome recognition of the risk it posed to minority groups in the UK and the US, even if we need to "guard against future cynical—and dangerous—political attempts to frame Covid-19 as largely a problem of minorities" (Chowkwanyun and Reed 203).[2] So, even as the event was talked about as a revenge attack by nature on the human species, it risked consolidating an individualized "atmoterrorism" that confirmed neoliberalism's tendency to divide people into consumer units. How surprising, then, that, far from developing an ideological isolationism in parallel with the pressure to isolate physically, many people reacted by entering into new forms of sociality, precisely through a solidarity of breathing near, but not too near, each other. The most laudable of these, and most relevant to the current essay, was the reemergence of Black Lives Matter as a global media presence, with its urgent message of radical solidarity. But some etiolated form of this solidarity can even be detected in the #ClapForOurCarers movements in Europe and the United Kingdom, marred as it often was by a kind of regressive nationalism that harked back to the recent rise of populism. Moreover, the unprecedented decision to prioritize the wellbeing of people over that of the economy in most, if not all, states signalled the possibility of an alternative politics that did not conflate solidarity with sameness, nor difference with token diversity. Neither did this politics resort to the populist interventions that marked 2016, whose protagonists were thoroughly, if not permanently, discredited by their failure to manage the administrative demands of the crisis. In this moment, as economic concerns rush back to reoccupy those spaces grudgingly conceded to public health, and

as populist leaders desperately try to regain their credibility in forms of diminishing coherence, the possibility of a ritual humiliation such as that imagined by Sinha seems increasingly unlikely. And yet, if anything, the crisis signals the need for a new form of site-specific awareness, one that can bridge the divides between a Bhopal and a 9/11 without subordinating one to the other. Perhaps, such an awareness may start with breathing together; near, but not too near.

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NOTES

Part of this work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council project "Scenes of Shame and Stigma in Covid-19" (grant number: AH/V013483/1)

[1] See for instance, work on laughter in the novel by Heather Snell, its relation to the "spectacle of Bhopal" by Andrew Mahlstedt, and its wider implications for human rights discourses post-9/11 by Kanishka Chowdhury.

[2] Although Merlin Chowkwanyun and Adolph L. Reed Jr. confine their comments to the US, their warning that "documenting Covid-19 racial disparities…can perpetuate harmful myths and misunderstandings that actually undermine the goal of eliminating health inequalities" (202) can equally apply to international forms of discrimination. In the wake of crisis, we risk the same recourse to "biological explanations for racial health disparities," "racial stereotypes about behavioural patterns" and "place-based stigma" that leads to further condemnation about behavior, repressive surveillance, calls for demolition, and simple neglect (202).

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